

# VISUAL NARRATIVES:

## Creating opportunities for telling stories

Coral Cara

Children have the right to make their own mark, in their own way, using their own ideas, with accessible tools/equipment, whatever their ability level or challenges may be.

We need to recognise that our students are multimodal in thought, word and action; adept at interpreting, thinking about and reading information. One only has to observe them watching a football match on television in which they are not only exposed to the actual game but simultaneously to a continuous barrage of items (scores, replays, analysis of play, injury reports, other events, etc) being flashed across, onto, below, above and around the game. Additionally, it is most likely that they are also engaged in other activities while they watch the game. They can also be working on the computer, as they listen to their iPod music and do their homework. They have become agents of simultaneous activity and therefore see this as the norm. Kress (2000) notes that literacy debates now include visual modes of communication as a result of the rapid movement from the printed medium to an age of visual images and greater access to technologies. Children from very young ages are computer literate and masters of multimodal multiliteracies, using a range of modes and mediums in their meaning making and in their documentation of that meaning.

In classrooms around the world, we are facing some students becoming disengaged and disenfranchised in ways that make it difficult for teachers and students alike to stimulate, motivate, engage and access teaching and learning. No longer is the traditional 'chalk and talk' appropriate nor relevant to the world of education nor to the lifeworlds of students. Gee (2003) notes the disparity between in class learning and the real world; and highlights the need for educators to utilize out of class learning strategies such as those in video games to enhance in class learning outcomes. In his analysis of computer games he recognises the qualities within the game structure that would be ideal if channelled into education as well, including scaffolded learning, progressive learning that continually has incentive to keep moving on; stimulating learning scapes, engaging multimodal scenarios that empower the user and provision of a sense of achievement at a range of levels. Allowing

students the opportunity to visually tell their stories incorporates many of these successful practices.

As teachers we now recognise that there are a range of learning preferences and styles within our classes. Most teachers work hard to incorporate knowledge of this diversity to enable students to be engaged and successfully navigate their own unique learning journeys. Of concern however, is whether teachers are incorporating this understanding into their assessment tasks, their activities and ensuring that there is provision for multiliterate and multimodal means of documenting learning. In particular there is a need to incorporate opportunities for students to be taught and engaged in a range of ways; but for this to be effective it also means educators must allow students the opportunity to tell their stories in a range of ways. Providing these opportunities will enable more students to actively participate, actively engage and most importantly actively tell their stories in authentic and meaningful ways.

*Each child is a dynamic being and sees the world differently from the way that he represents it and, as he grows, his expression changes (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1975).*

Research into brain compatible learning clearly recognizes the need for both right and left brain activities. However schools have tended to focus on the logic side of learning and to a lesser extent on the creative side of learning. Such creativity would promote new ways of seeing and doing, thinking beyond the norm, creating and making unique contributions, and laterally thinking to combine and create newness (Schirrmacher, 1998). Creativity is a normal brain function that builds fluency of ideas and functions, flexibility, originality and problem solving. All of these attributes would help students to navigate and document meaningful learning journeys and stories. By not providing students with the means, the mediums and the modes of choice, in documenting their journeys we are doing them a disservice.

Open-ended tasks that promote students' personal expression empowers learners to use process and

Meaning making can be more accessible through the use of visual narrative opportunity. Increasingly, research is examining the verbal but also the visual in visual narrative inquiry. Since no two children are alike; each differs from his earlier self as he constantly grows, perceives, understands, and interprets his environment. Each child is a dynamic being and sees the world differently from the way that he represents it and, as he grows, his expression changes. Therefore, all children need to make their own mark, their own way and to tell their own stories.

*'Meaning making is not just about making texts, but is also about the making of our selves, in a process of becoming'*  
(Lillis, 2001: 48).

part of their literary work to tell a story and through this they are building a visual narration. This is not to say that educators cannot combine the multimodal opportunities of visual, aural, oral and gestural as another avenue to explore with the visual narrative. And in fact, visual narrative is frequently used in the form of video in which students eagerly create a visual medium as the framework and incorporate sound to further amplify meaning. In the past, *text* referred to the printed form, but today it can refer to film, arts and multiple formats. Following are some examples of the use of visual narrative, visual representations used by students to tell their stories. They by no means represent the multitude of ideas and activities that could occur in effective classrooms, however, they are provided as food for thought about the opportunities that visual narrative provides for students.

All students given sufficient time and support can and do progress (no matter what their level or starting point). As educators we need to give all students a starting point and build upon their strengths. For many learners, visuals are an important hook for engagement, retention and access to learning. As a thinking curriculum facilitator, I believe that all classrooms (no matter what the age group or focus) need to acknowledge, recognize and use learning styles and preferences to the advantage of the learners in that class. One such tool is Mind Mapping (Buzan, 2001) which is a graphic organizer that supports note making, note taking, decision making, presentations, and so on. Its importance and value is that it aids retention, allows for organization of thoughts and graphically it clearly tells a story. I have taught and used this process with all age groups from preschool to tertiary, with principals and business. Within the context of this paper I do not intend to teach the process but rather to use it as another example of visual narrative. See the examples below. Figure 1 shows a young child's



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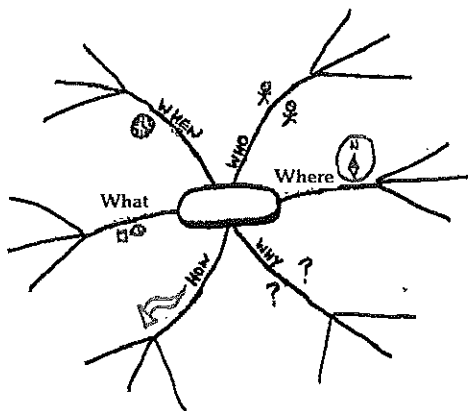


Figure 2: Progressive Mind Map

visual narrative after a farm visit. Figure 2 shows a progressive narrative mind map, one that gets added to as the thoughts and activities develop.

Another example commonly used in classrooms is Story Mapping. This is where students record the information in the form of pictorial representations to tell a story, paraphrase a story, or reflect upon a story or information that they have heard or seen. This visual narrative is important because once again it allows students the opportunity to record, reflect, document and retain information. Its importance is amplified because it enables them to record in meaningful ways, which are unique to them, their story and their reflection.

#### *Scenario Two: 2D Visual narrative created using photography or cut and paste collage*

We all know how difficult it can be to engage some students for whatever reasons. Perhaps due to reasons beyond their control they are not able to use the faculties available to others such as creating the printed format, or perhaps they are just not stimulated by these strategies and need open tasks that allow them to explore and create their stories. What if we were to give children cameras and ask them to take some photos to express themselves (the topic could be stipulated or alternatively open within a theme)? Even young children can handle a camera; and it need not be an expensive venture (the purchase of some throw away cameras takes away concerns about damage, cost and replacement). If cameras are beyond reach, the same can be accomplished with students cutting and pasting from magazines to create their sequence and story. In this scenario the students were allowed to take the camera home for a chance to photograph something they valued. The self-reflexive aspect of story telling incorporates the intellectual process of interpreting and incorporates the creative by creating symbolic representation of meaning

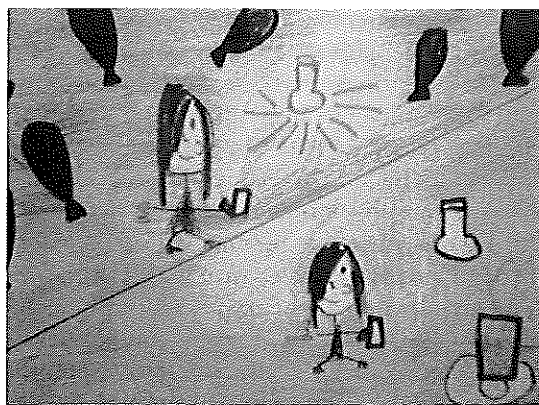


Figure 3: Young child story map (Science Activity)

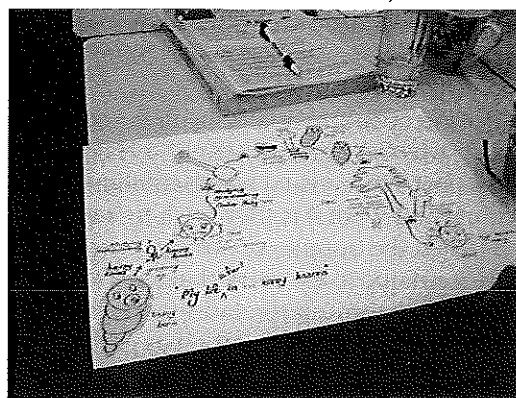


Figure 4: Older student story map

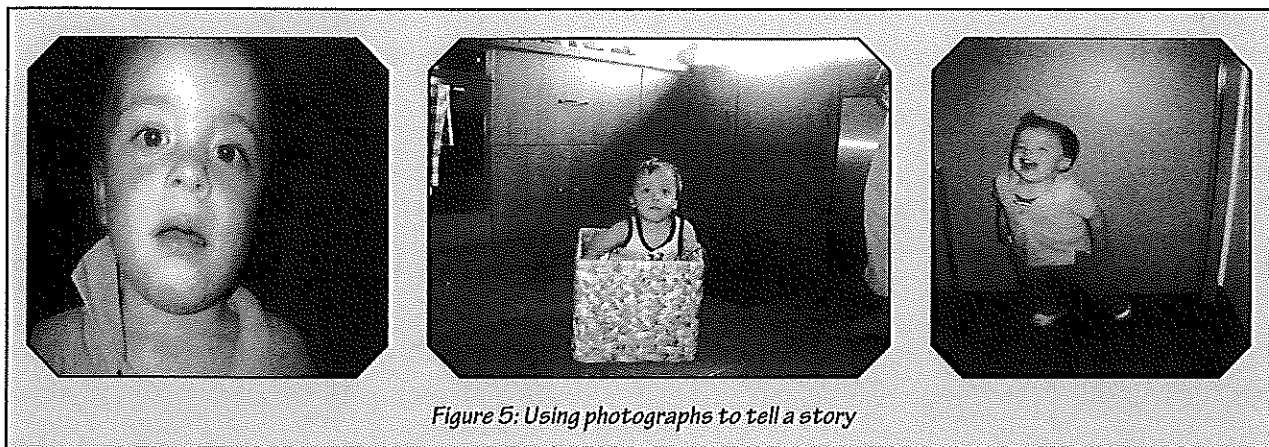
through imagery. It is both revealing and generates self awareness, agency and empowerment.

What stories can you read from this visual narrative? What message do you think was being told?

Older students are given a task of taking a set of photos to help others understand how they learn. They each bring the photographs to the classroom and set them up in a sequence and allow their peers to wander around interpreting each others' visual stories. After having time to reflect the students come back together and suggest what they interpreted in the visual representation. The final speaker is the author of the visual narrative and they describe to others what it was they were depicting. This activity is useful for building the visual narratives and allowing them to evolve into verbal narratives.

#### *Scenario Three: 3D Visual narratives*

Students are asked to create a visual representation of themselves. They are taken into a room with many materials available to them including a range of coloured papers of various shapes and sizes, pens, paint, glue, boxes, pipe cleaners, and so on. No further instruction is necessary. The students



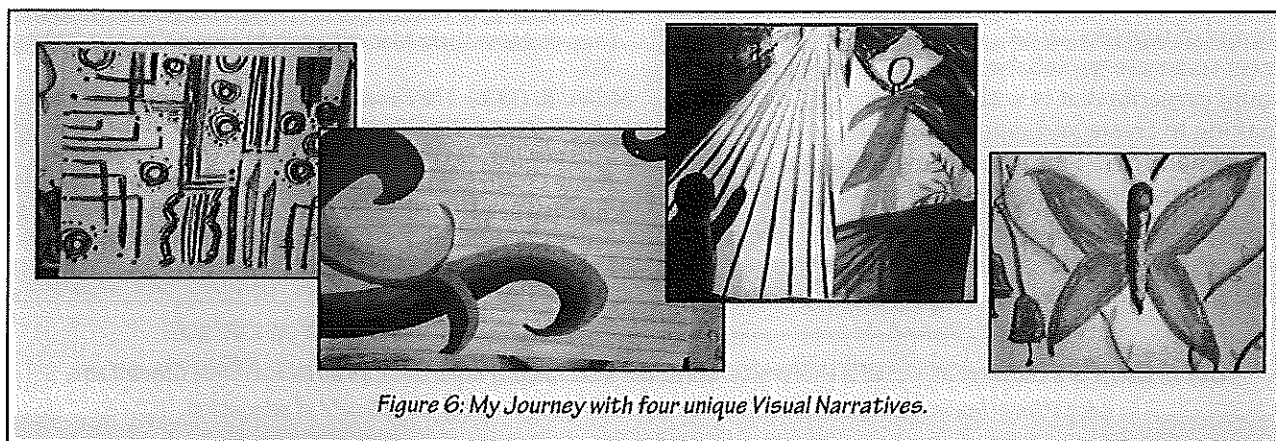
freely wander from table to table and are completely engrossed in their task. Interestingly a wide range of visual representations evolve. They are all unique and each tells a specific and targeted story. Creators are obviously proud of their 'work' and confidently put their creation on display at the end of the session for others to view. What was significant about this activity was the wide range of styles and creations – flat collages, hanging mobiles, three-dimensional models, and some with a mixture of expressive elements such as cut and paste combined with sketches. In many ways, these 3D visual narratives evolved during the creative process because the creators began with an idea in mind, which modified as they were exposed to the qualities of the materials, intertwined with their thoughts about what they wanted to say and who they saw themselves as. As an observer, I saw students' trial materials, construction ideas and then either discard or modify them. They were interested in the meaning they were depicting and also the aesthetic quality that they wished to produce.

#### Scenario Four: 'My Journey' Visual Narrative as Personal and Professional story telling

Tell me your story of learning. It is important to

allow space for students to become self aware; 'Students use artistic practices as cultural and personal responses to experience including their search for identity' (Freedman, 2003: 40). The visual narratives were once again varied and meaningful to the creators and the audience. Additionally, through the display of visual narrative, students have the opportunity to read and interpret the stories of others and in doing so they locate similarities, other views, and means of representation. In this part of the reflective process, they gain and evolve their own thoughts and interpretations; just as we do as teachers through every interaction with our students. We learn and grow through and with others.

Visual Narrative is intended to be offered within a suite of classroom activities that integrate a range of teaching and learning styles and preferences and ideally it is also offered in the range of opportunities to document information. As with other thinking tools, it is important to explicitly introduce such a tool so that all students are given the opportunity to explore, experiment and elicit what works for them. It is also important to note that within Visual Narrative there is no right way or wrong way; so this opens doors for many learners. It is constructed



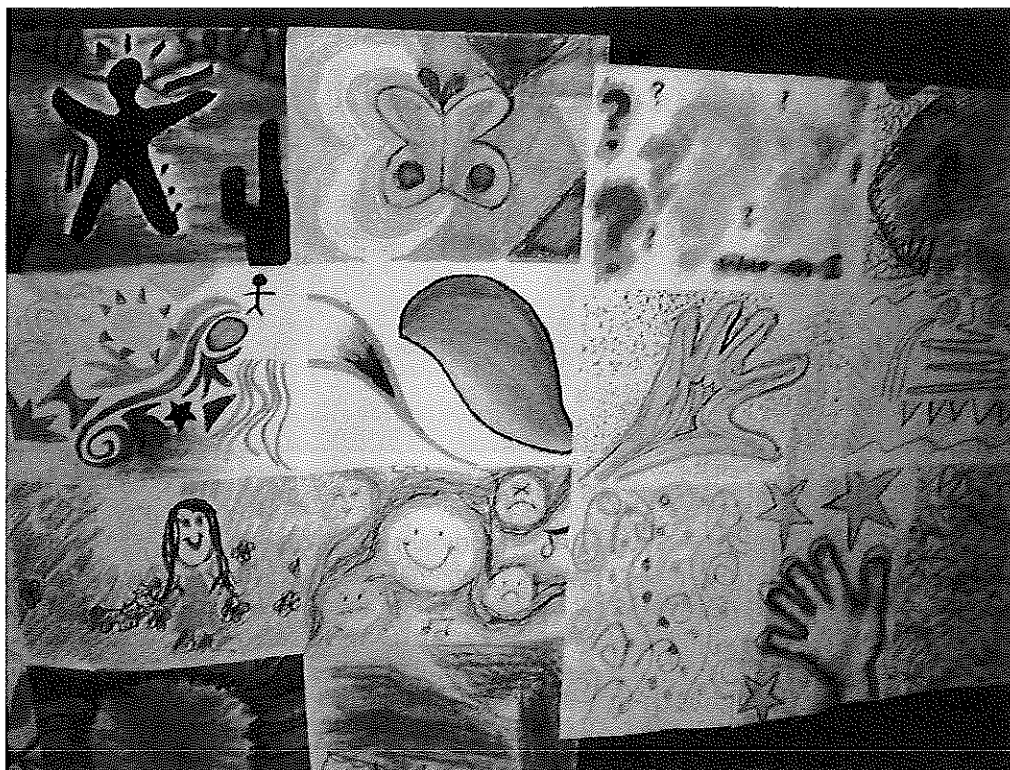


Figure 7: The power of visual narrative –A powerful group display of 'My Journey'

with the purpose of telling a story and therefore the 'visual images are not static and monologic spatial representations but are infused with dialogic quality' (Doloughan, 2004).

One real benefit of Visual Narrative is that it may well open doors for reticent print learners, because it can't be as prescriptive as is often the case in the printed word. For example, the teacher who sets a task and requires a 500 word report to be written by the students may inadvertently be setting up barriers for some students. In Visual Narrative the task could be expressed as 'Create a visual representation that denotes *fun*'. The outcome of this task could be a model, a collage, a drawing, a self-created video, a dramatisation or a mix of several means of representation. There is not the pressure to meet some pre-established level of writing and word count prescribed; it is within the learners' decision making to create and define their own unique visual narrative. This opportunity for open minded thought and creativity is at once challenging and exciting. But most of all, it is empowering!

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